

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of the Ombudsman

Tonya Vidal Kinlow
Ombudsman



To: Mayor Adrian Fenty
Council Chairman Vincent Gray

CC: Councilmember Carol Schwartz
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Chancellor Michelle Rhee
State Superintendent Deborah Gist
State Board of Education Members
Public Charter School Board Members

From: Tonya Vidal Kinlow
Ombudsman for Public Education

Date: July 7, 2008

Re: Office of the Ombudsman April 2008 Case Report

The Office of the Ombudsman submits the attached report and analysis of its April 2008 cases for your information. Please feel free to contact Tonya Vidal Kinlow at (202) 442-6363 if you have questions or need additional information.

Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education

April 2008 Report

The following report summarizes the April 2008 activity in the Office of the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman is a neutral, independent resource for problem resolution in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Public Charter Schools (PCS) and the University of the District of Columbia.

Issues Analysis

In April 2008, the Office of the Ombudsman worked to resolve 117 issues brought to us by 92 people. The caseload in April represented a significant increase in total contacts. Ombudsman staff attributes the increase to community outreach and coordination with other government agencies that make referrals on education issues.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of the issues that the Office of the Ombudsman addressed on behalf of individuals. Concerns about administrative issues from personnel and students far exceeded any other issues at 9 and 25 respectively.

	Issue Code	Definition	Frequency of Issue Reported
Personnel 19 %	PAM	Personnel Administrative	9
	PAT	Personnel Termination	3
	PPB	Personnel Pay/Benefits	3
	PPX	Personnel Other	4
	PSH	Personnel Safety/Harassment	2
Student 81 %	SAM	Student Administrative	25
	SCM	Student Communications	16
	SMD	Student Medical	2
	SSE	Student Special Education	14
	SSS	Student Safety/Abuse/Bullying	16
	SST	Student Suspension Truancy	15
	SPX	Student Other	8

Figure 1 – Case Code Definitions

Figure 2 is a breakdown of cases by the types of issues that individuals needed help resolving. In total, 81 percent of the cases were student-related issues. Concerns from personnel comprised 19 percent of the April Ombudsman issues.

April 2008 Issues Summary

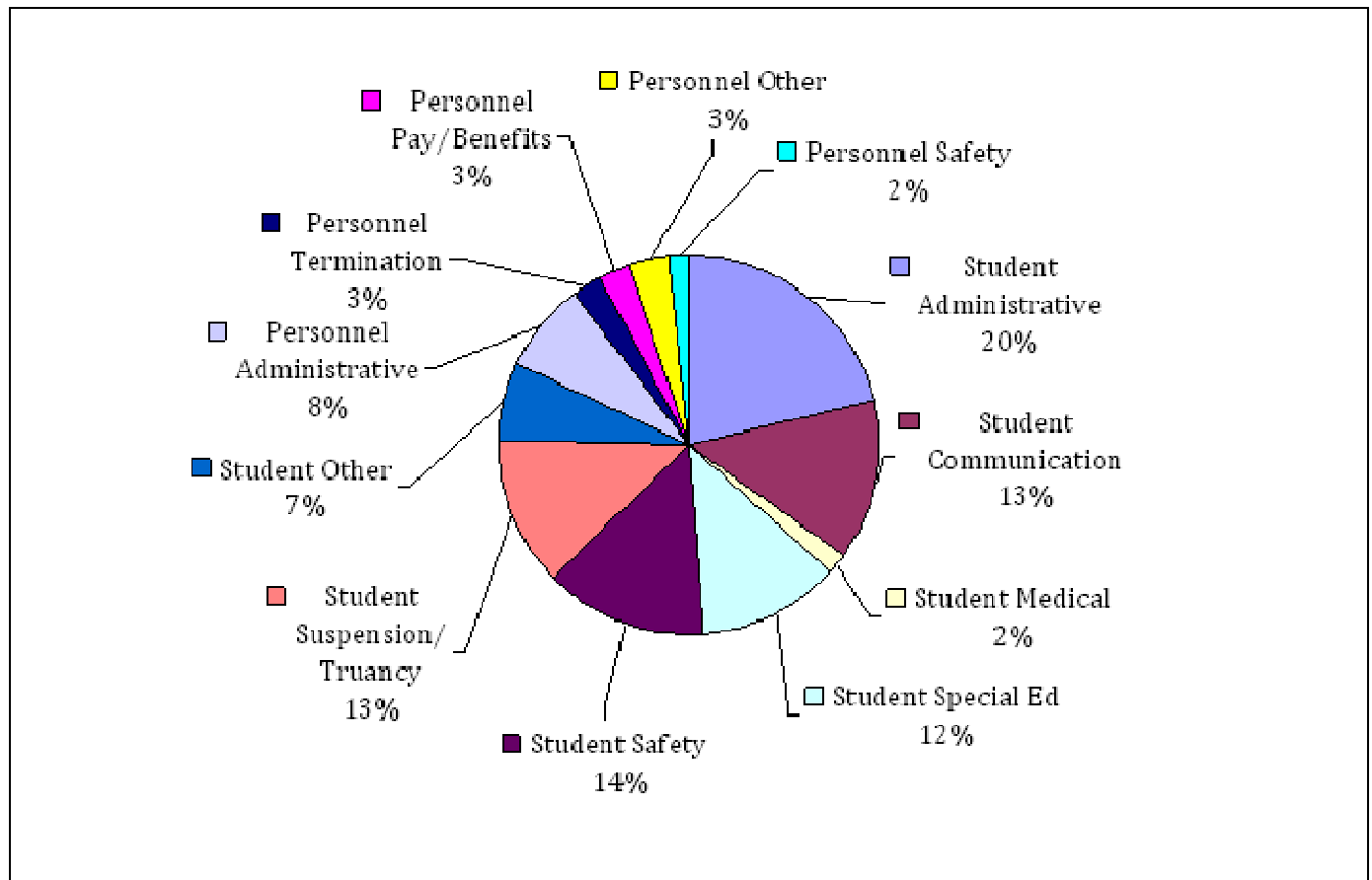


Figure 2 – Frequency Profile of all Issues

April 2008 Student Data

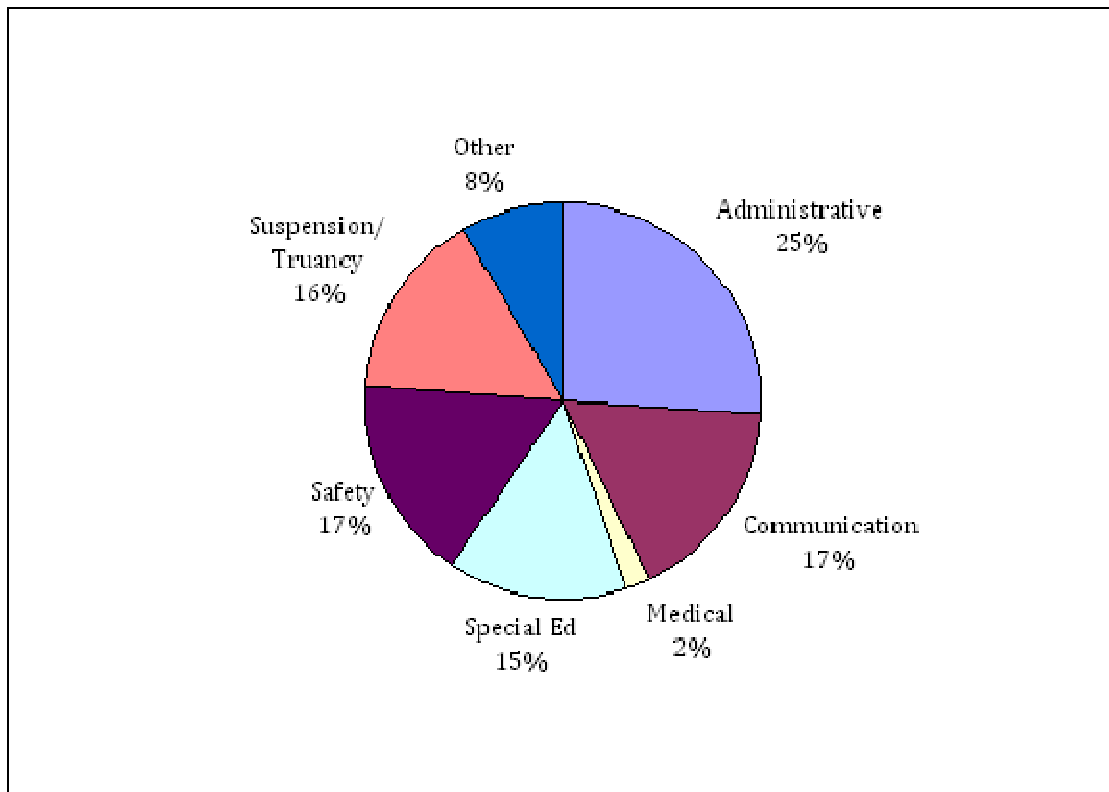


Figure 3: Profile of Student Issue Codes

Student Issue Analysis

The relative frequency of safety, special education, and suspension issues were almost of equal value in April, at 17, 15 and 16 percent respectively. A key observation involving suspensions is that there is very little consistency in the policies and application of those policies within schools. Each public charter school or charter school system (i.e., schools with multiple campuses) establishes its own student discipline policy. While DCPS schools operate under a uniform disciplinary policy, individual principals have great flexibility on how to apply that policy. Families are often unfamiliar with their rights to appeal suspension decisions, especially in charter schools.

The special education cases often involve a breakdown in communications. Parents continue to report that they ask for support and the school does not follow-thru or it takes months to respond. Among the 17 percent of cases involving school safety, individuals reported threats of gang violence against one or a group of students, bullying or fights. Many individuals who contacted the office with safety-related problems expressed concern about the effectiveness of security personnel.

Administrative issues, which made up 25 percent of all student related cases, included problems with transcripts and graduation. The spike in administrative issues in April indicates the cyclical nature of school-based problem resolution. Beginning in April, public schools begin to finalize the list of students who will and will not graduate. Families often challenge reports indicating that their child is not going to graduate. In graduation-related disputes, the Ombudsman's office facilitated transcript reviews to

determine graduation status. If the graduation notification process worked, families of senior high school students would have gotten annual notifications of a student's graduation status. In senior year, the school would have sent multiple notices. The school requires both the student and the parent to sign the report. When evaluating these cases, the Ombudsman's office saw problems in parent responsiveness to school communications as well as breakdowns in school notification process. Public school leaders should evaluate all high schools to make sure the schools are implementing this process.

Personnel Issues Analysis

Administrative issues topped the list of concerns that public school staff contacted the Ombudsman about in April. A unique case involved an immigrant teacher seeking sponsorship from the District to continue working. The teacher had the full support of the school administration and departmental chair. The school sought to keep the teacher to help establish instructional stability in the department. Initial efforts by the teacher to get a response from central administration about sponsorship went unanswered. The Ombudsman helped to coordinate a response. Ultimately, the District said "no" to sponsorship. DCPS is currently in the process of developing a system to meet federal guidelines on non-citizen employee sponsorship. Until that process is in place, it could not sponsor this or any other immigrant teacher this year. In this case, the impact on the school was the loss of a highly qualified teacher in a field of study where it is difficult to find quality instructors.

April 2008 Personnel Data

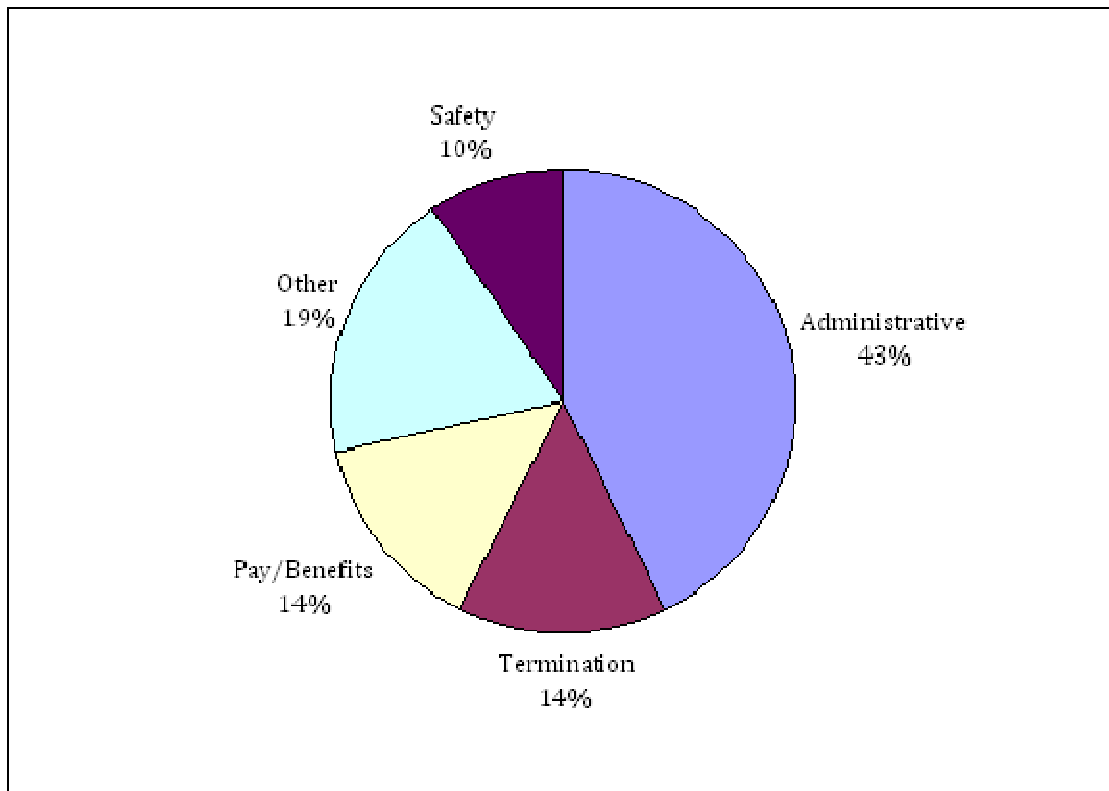


Figure 4 – Frequency of Personnel Contacts

Other personnel issues included complaints from DCPS transportation employees. Several employees reported unfavorable working conditions. Ombudsman staff encountered significant barriers when working to resolve these issues. The DCPS transportation system is under court-ordered supervision. The staff in that operation has been unresponsive to Ombudsman efforts to resolve transportation-related issues.

Analysis of Cases by Education Sector

Figure 5 is a profile of contacts by education sector. Individual contacts from District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) personnel and families made up 84 percent of April cases. Contacts from individuals in Public Charter Schools (PCS) comprised 11 percent. The Ombudsman received request for support from individuals at the University of the District of Columbia in 3 percent of all contacts. 2 percent of contacts came from non-public schools.

Several of the DCPS-related cases were about school closings and restructuring. Both parents and school personnel sought information about the next steps in the closing process. Parents and community members from one school community wanted DCPS to reconsider the closing decision. The school's representatives said they felt school officials had not heard them during the school closings meetings. Ombudsman staff coordinated a meeting with public school leaders and the school's representatives. Ultimately the decision remained the same, but the school representatives refocused their efforts on participating in the school reuse process.

April 2008 Cases by Education Sector

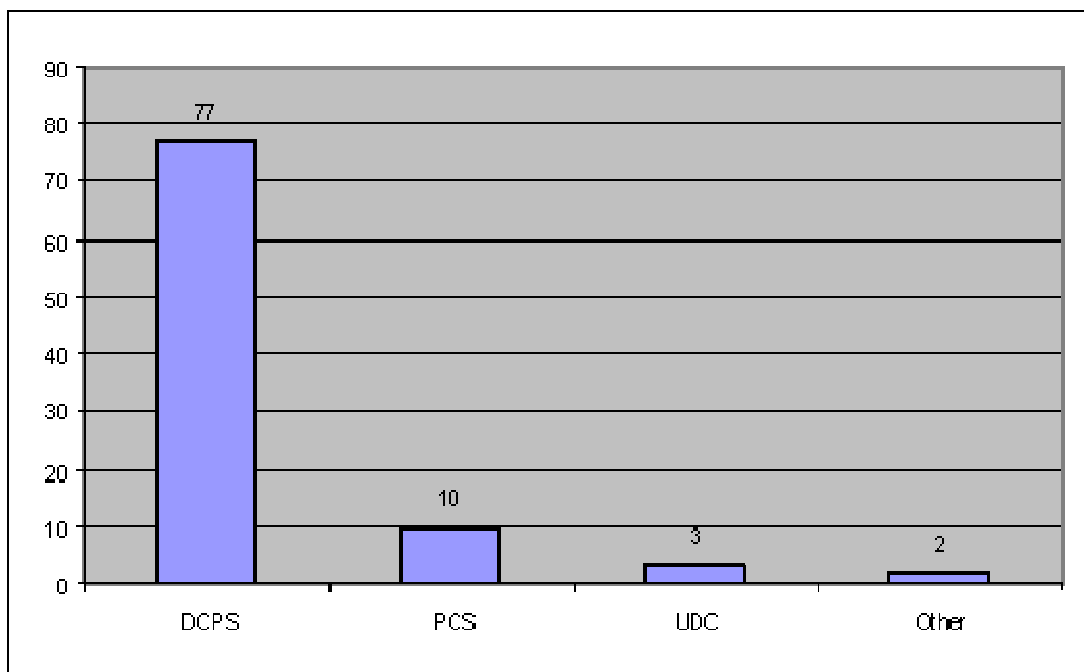


Figure 5 – Profile of Contacts by Education Sector

Conclusion

In April, the types of cases remained consistent. While the Ombudsman saw a spike in the number of personnel-related contacts, the number of student-related issues still maintained the significant majority. Administrative issues topped both the student and personnel issues, with questions about school closings and graduation representing a majority of the concerns. Parent concerns about student suspensions, special education, and safety illustrate a consistent trend with prior months' activities.